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ABSTRACT

The status of sociology at the secondary level is reviewed in this paper. Currently, instruction in the social sciences plays a minor role, as most social studies programs consist more of history than any other discipline. To determine the nature of their high school training in sociology and to determine whether their current university course was a duplication of what was received in high school, introductory sociology students from three Michigan universities responded to a questionnaire. The results indicate that two-thirds of the students had no sociology or related course in high school. For those few students who had a sociology course, it was usually a one-semester elective in which the content differed greatly from their introductory college sociology course. Sociological Resources for the Social Studies, a major secondary-level sociology curriculum project sponsored by the American Sociological Association, was identified by less than one percent of the respondents. University instruction in teaching sociology at the high-school level is recommended to help solve this problem. (Author/DE)

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UNIVERSITY STUDENTS EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS OF HIGH SCHOOL SOCIOLOGY

by

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UNIVERSITY STUDENTS EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS

OF HIGH SCHOOL SOCIOLOGY

The focus of this paper is on sociology at the secondary level. But the more general purpose is to explore some issues related to the training of teachers, development of materials and uses of sociology by persons who have no interest in nor inclination toward pursuing advanced training in or becoming professional sociologists. More appropriate titles for this paper might be "Sociology for the non-sociologist," "A layman's exposure to the nature of sociology," or "The failure of the professional sociologist to educate the public."

This paper is based on the general assumption that sociologists have something of value to offer the public and more specifically, have something of value to offer college and high school students who will not major in or become sociologists. This assumption that sociologists have something of value to offer is clearly a value stance with which some sociologists themselves are likely to disagree. To some, sociology may be a means of employment and a way to earn a living. As long as job security, steady income and enjoyable working conditions exist, it matters little if the consequences are of value. To some, sociology is of worth because it is concerned with the acquisition of knowledge. Assuming that "knowing is better than not-knowing" any discipline that contributes to what is known, to the body of knowledge, is of value. Finally, to some, in addition to providing employment and/or knowledge,

sociology has a utility, not only for the professional sociologist but for the student who embarks upon its study for the first time, for persons in business who need to understand their clientele, and for the politician, the civil rights worker, or the housewife, who need to understand themselves in relation to their social world.

From this latter perspective, sociology is a discipline that liberates people from the provincialisms of class, color, region, sex or religion. It is a discipline that emphasizes objectivity, that provides an historical and cross-national perspective to daily activities, and that assists persons to recognize and appreciate the social world that surrounds them and of which they are a part. Sociology becomes of value, not only to the professional sociologist but to every person in society.

To adhere to this latter value of sociology is to agree that the teaching of sociology extends beyond graduate training, and beyond the undergraduate sociology major to the student who does not major in sociology or to the person who does not attend college. To view sociology as being of value to all social beings irrespective of profession, education or race magnifies the significance of the introduction to sociology course whether at the college or high school level. If students take any sociology at all, it will likely be the introductory course.

There would appear to be little argument on the lack of social science sophistication among the general public. It is likely that most adults in the U.S. today and most students in secondary school are not or have not been exposed to any formal systematic training in sociology. It is likely that a vast majority of the population cannot

differentiate sociology from social work, social engineering, or socialism. It is likely that a sizable proportion of our population is convinced that human behavior cannot be studied systematically. The National Science Foundation, as well as the administrations of many universities including my own, make reference to the sciences and social sciences. The point is that the public as a whole, including the most highly educated, appear to have a poor grasp into the nature of social science, social research, social organization, social roles and values, social institutions, or social change.

Perhaps social scientists themselves, or more specifically sociologists themselves, are largely to blame for this situation. Perhaps this is due to the newness of the discipline. Perhaps this is due to the lack of clarity of its own goals. Perhaps this is due to the low level of prestige and lack of rewards offered to the sociologist who concentrates on teacher training activities, secondary curriculum development and the like. However it is explained, it is time for creating an awareness of existing conditions in our secondary schools, an awareness of efforts being made to develop curriculum including those of the ASA, and a plea for universities and colleges to consider offering courses or programs aimed at the teaching of sociology and the training of secondary teachers in sociology.

The data for this paper comes from several sources. One source consists of highly impressionistic data derived from directing and teaching in seven summer institutes in sociology for high school teachers, a year's work in Precollege education in the Instructional Improvement

Implementation Section of the National Science Foundation, and various experiences with the Social Science Education Consortium including a project on social studies innovation in secondary schools. The second major source consists of survey research data gathered from 947 students enrolled in an Introduction to Sociology class at Wayne State University, the University of Michigan and Western Michigan University in the spring of 1974.

At the present time, instruction in the social sciences plays a minor role in our secondary schools. Most schools have programs designated as social studies which consist more of history than any single social science discipline. Included in the social studies may be courses in World or American history, Problems of democracy, civics, Asian or Latin American studies, family living, contemporary issues and the like in addition to anthropology, economics, geography, political science, psychology and sociology. Where the social science disciplines do exist, they are frequently descriptive as in history or some problems of democracy courses, or prescriptive as in courses on Americanism, consumer behavior, or family living. It appears that far less frequently are the social sciences viewed in analytical terms which explain the social order or man's/woman's behavior in society.

To focus the remainder of the paper on sociology at the secondary level is not to lessen the need for or argue against a "unified social science."[1] Sociology, like the other social sciences, seeks basic theories, principles, generalizations or propositions that are independent of time and place. But it seems realistic, and perhaps more practical,

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[1] Alfred Kuhn, Unified Social Science: A System-Based Approach, Homewood, Illinois, Dorsey Press, 1975.

to develop a level of training and sophistication in specific social science disciplines before attempting to unify them.

What is the state of sociology at the secondary level, at least as viewed by university students enrolled in an introductory sociology course? To determine the nature of their high school training in sociology and to determine whether their current university course was a duplication of what was received in high school, brief questionnaires were given in the spring of 1974 to 279 students at Wayne State University, 291 students at the University of Michigan and 377 students at Western Michigan University.

The responses of the students at these three schools was generally similar with several noted exceptions (See Table 1). The majority of students at Western Michigan (55 percent) and at the university of Michigan (61 percent) were college freshmen wheras at Wayne State, most were sophomores (63 percent) with only 6 percent freshmen. Also, Wayne was different in several other respects. The majority of the respondents at Wayne were males (64 percent) compared to about one-third male respondents at Western and U. of M. In addition, Wayne students were older, 45 percent over age 20, compared to 19 percent at Western and only 5 percent at U. of M. These sex and age differences could be expected to influence responses to other items but did not appear to do so to any major degree. The single exception may be in response to whether sociology should be required in high school. Nearly one-fourth of Wayne students responded that it should be required compared to 14 percent at Western and 9 percent at the University of Michigan. Western Michigan differed from the other two schools primarily in the percentage of respondents definitely planning to get a teaching

certificate, 27 percent, compared to 16 percent at Wayne and 12 percent at U. of M. The University of Michigan differed from the other two schools in the percentage of students who were taking Introduction to Sociology as their first sociology course (Table 1). This may be related to the fact that 61 percent of the student respondents at U. of M. are freshmen. While the difference is not a major one, the University of Michigan also had the smallest percentage of respondents planning to major in sociology and planning to get a teaching certificate. Again this may be related to their younger age, their first year in college or possibly to the lesser emphasis given to undergraduate as opposed to graduate education at Michigan.

About one-third of the college student respondents had a sociology course in high school. For 84 percent of these students the course was an elective. These two combined figures could mean 1) that college bound high school students have additional course requirements that decrease their option for an elective in sociology, 2) that college bound high school students do not choose sociology as an elective even if the course is available, or 3) that sociology courses are not available for many high school students.[2] Perhaps all three, or other, explanations exist. Nevertheless, most college students did not have sociology in high school, and it could be hypothesized that a similar pattern exists for the non-college bound student. On the other hand, if sociology in high school has a reputation of being non-rigorous (as I suspect it frequently has), has an instructor who is trained in

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[2] 1970-71 data from the National Center for Educational Statistics indicated that only 33 percent of public secondary schools offered a course in sociology (up from 19.5 percent a decade earlier).

physical education, history or a field other than sociology (as I suspect many are), and is not granted prestigious status within the curriculum (as I suspect it is not), than the poorer students may enroll for an easy course or easy grade. Even so, the percentage of students who enroll in a course in sociology is low.[3]

For ninety percent of the students who took sociology in high school it was a one semester course. Unlike many courses in the high school curriculum, sociology seldom is taken for a time period extending throughout the year. However it frequently is linked to a semester of psychology or other social science. Most students (67 percent) took their course in sociology during their senior year. Only seven percent of the students who took sociology in high school did so in their freshman or sophomor year. Again, this would suggest that few students who drop-out of high school prior to their senior year have any opportunity to take a course in sociology even if they desire to do so. Interestingly nearly three-fourths of these students responded that their teacher of sociology was a male. These figures parallel closely the predominate male applications for participation in teacher training institutes of sociology.

An argument might be made that it not be disturbing that only one-third of the respondents had a high school course in sociology because sociological content is presented in courses other than sociology. Thus the students were asked, "Did you have a course(s) in high school called something other than "sociology" that included basic sociological topics or issues?" Most students responded that they did not, ranging from a

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[3] Again referring to 1970-71 National Center for Educational Statistics data, only 4.3 percent of the total enrollment in public secondary schools had taken sociology.

low of 14 percent among Wayne respondents to 28 percent among U. of M. respondents. In brief, it appears that most students are not exposed to any formal training in sociology either by title or conceptual content to mention nothing of the quality of instruction among those who stated they had a course, called sociology or something else, that contained sociological topics or issues.

A final question gets at this same dimension: "Do you find the material you are now covering in this college introductory sociology course basically repetitive of material you had in high school?" Only 11 percent, slightly more than one in ten, felt their introductory course to be repetitive of prior training. An additional 11 percent were undecided but 77 percent responded that the material was not repetitive. Considering the proportion of college students who take sociology in relation to the total population of both students and non-students, is it little wonder why in the minds of the public, sociology is equated with social work or socialism, why sociology is not a science, or why human behavior and social systems cannot be systematically and rigorously studied?

That sociology is unimportant or undesirable is clearly not a patterned response among the students who completed the questionnaire. While only 15 percent felt that sociology should be required in high school, an additional 80 percent felt it should be available. Thus less than five percent indicated a negative response to sociology in high school.

Efforts have been made to provide material suitable for use in secondary schools. Sponsored by the American Sociological Association and funded by the National Science Foundation, a set of materials were

developed known as "Sociological Resources for the Social Studies." Several million dollars were spent over a period of years to write, test and publish sociological materials appropriate for the senior high school student. Three types of materials were developed: 1) short episodes containing both a student and teacher manual which could supplement existing social studies programs, 2) paperback books of sociological readings, and 3) a textbook, Inquiries in Sociology. Emphasis was on the development of sociology materials which would be academically honest, interesting and relevant to students. A key approach to the material was the utilization of a scientific process for sociological inquiry.

The project was closed in August, 1971, thus four to seven years have passed since SRSS material was made available. And yet, it is clearly evident that most professional sociologists are unaware of their existence, and still fewer faculty make these materials available to their students, even those who plan to teach sociology or social science in the high school.

What about the students themselves? Surely if they had sociology in high school in 1972 or 1973, most students would be familiar with SRSS. The results are hardly surprising. Eight of the 947 respondents (0.9 percent) could identify Sociological Resources for the Social Studies. An additional 76 respondents (8.2 percent) were uncertain if they heard of it or not. What about high school teachers of sociology. Certainly they would know about, if not be using, these materials. While national or state data is not available on this issue, one study done at the University of Michigan of 252 social studies teachers from five

midwestern states, showed that about 30 percent of the respondents had heard of each of the three behavioral science projects funded by the National Science Foundation: The Anthropology Curriculum Studies Project, the High School Geography Project or the Sociological Resources for the Social Studies.[4] The writer was amazed that while interviewing during May, 1975, in a county wide school district in Florida, not o a social studies chairman or teacher had used or was familiar with the SRSS materials.

This is not meant to suggest that SRSS material is the only suitable material for use in secondary schools. However, more funds, manpower, time and testing went into the development of these materials than any other project in history aimed at sociology in the high school. And both students and university faculty are, in general, not aware of their existence.

In summary, the focus of this paper was aimed at sociology at the secondary level. The more general purpose was to explore some issues related to the training of teachers, development of materials and uses of sociology by persons who have no interest in nor inclination toward pursuing advanced training in or becoming professional sociologists. The paper was based on the general assumption that sociologists have something to offer the public in general and the high school student in particular. Arguments were made for a concentrated effort at making available an introductory sociology course or a related alternative. Social studies programs as they currently exist are failing to expose students to basic

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4 Thomas J. Switzer et. al., "Dissemination and Implementation of Social Studies Project Materials," Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Council of Social Studies, Chicago, Illinois, November, 1974.

ideas and conceptual tools necessary for an understanding of the social order and the society in which they live.

Data from 947 students at three universities in Michigan was presented that showed most had no sociology or related course in high school, and those who took it chose it as an elective in their senior year. Even if they had no sociology course, no other high school course included basic sociological topics or issues and only eleven percent perceived their college introductory course to be repetitive of training received in high school. Sociological Resources for the Social Studies, sponsored by the American Sociological Association, was identified by only a small proportion of the respondents.

Recommendations for change could be made at every level of training. To concentrate at the university level, instructors need to be aware that for most students, the introductory course may be their sole formal classroom exposure to sociology. Instructors need to remain sensitive to materials and resources appropriate for the student who may one day be teaching sociology in a high school setting. Perhaps, it is time that colleges initiate a course in the teaching of sociology and in sociology for teachers. Until our system of higher education and our professional associations provide rewards for the professional sociologist to train teachers, develop appropriate materials for secondary schools, and write for the general public, an educated, sensitive, and alert adult population to the social sciences may be a long way off.

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Table 1. Responses from Students Taking Introduction to Sociology Courses at Wayne State U., Western Michigan U. and the U. of Michigan, Spring 1974

	Wayne*	Western*	U. of M.*	Total*
Class Rank				
Freshman	5.7%	54.9%	60.8%	42.2%
Sophomore	63.4	26.3	32.3	39.1
Junior	20.1	10.9	3.4	11.3
Senior	9.7	7.7	2.7	6.8
Graduate	1.1	0.3	0.7	0.6
Sex				
Male	64.2%	36.8%	38.3%	45.3%
Female	35.8	63.2	61.7	54.7
Age				
17-	0.0	0.6%	0.4%	0.3%
18	5.6%	30.8	39.9	26.6
19	25.7	31.9	40.9	33.0
20	24.1	17.8	14.2	18.4
21-30	38.1	17.3	4.5	19.0
31+	6.5	1.8	0.8	2.4
First College Sociology Course				
Yes	83.1%	84.8%	98.6%	88.6%
No	16.9	15.2	1.4	11.4
High School Sociology Course				
Yes	32.5%	41.0%	33.7%	36.3%
No	67.5	59.0	66.3	63.7
High School Course Was:				
Elective	79.1%	90.8%	76.5%	83.6%
Required	19.8	9.2	21.4	15.5
High School Course Was:				
One semester	96.7%	88.2%	87.5%	90.2%
Two semesters	3.3	9.9	12.5	8.9
Teacher of High School Course Was:				
Male	77.0%	67.1%	76.1%	72.3%
Female	23.0%	32.9	23.9	27.7

Table 1 Continued

	Wayne	Western	U. of M.	Total
High School Course Taken as:				
Freshman	0	0.7%	3.4%	1.3%
Sophomore	4.8%	6.3	6.7	6.0
Junior	16.7	27.3	21.3	22.8
Senior	78.6	62.9	62.9	67.1
Other High School Course That included Soc. topics:				
Yes	14.2%	24.5%	27.8%	22.4%
No	85.8	75.5	72.2	77.6
Ever heard of SRSS:				
Yes	0.7%	0.5%	1.4%	0.9%
No	91.6	90.0	91.6	90.9
Uncertain	7.7	9.5	7.0	8.2
College Soc. Course Repetitive of H.S. Soc. Course:				
Yes	9.3%	10.1%	13.7%	11.0%
No	83.7	77.2	71.6	77.4
Undecided	7.0	12.7	14.8	11.6
Should H.S. Soc. be:				
Required	24.3%	13.9%	8.8%	15.4%
Available	70.6	84.2	84.2	80.2
Not Available	5.1	1.9	7.0	4.4
Plan to Major in Soc.:				
Yes	4.3%	5.3%	1.8%	4.0%
Uncertain	6.9	18.4	9.8	12.4
No	88.8	76.2	88.4	83.6
Getting Teaching Certificate:				
Yes	15.6%	27.0%	11.8%	19.0%
Uncertain	12.7	17.4	15.3	15.4
No	71.7	55.6	72.8	65.6

*All "non-responses" are not shown. Thus percentage totals may not equal 100%.

N = 947 (Wayne 279) (Western 377) (U. of M. 291)